DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 767 CS 207 097

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TITLE Observing and Recording Children's Responses to Literature Read Aloud.
INSTITUTION North Dakota Univ., Grand Forks. Center for Teaching and Learning.
PUB DATE Sep 82
NOTE 12p.
AVAILABLE FROM Insights, Center for Teaching and Learning, Box 8158, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202 (subscription $3.50 per year).
JOURNAL CIT Insights Into Open Education; v15 n1 Sep 1982

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classification: Grade 1; Guidelines; Nonverbal Communication; Primary Education; *Reading Aloud to Others; Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection; *Reading Research; *Student Behavior; *Student Reaction; Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

Reading research has provided repeated evidence of measurable growth in reading performance and language development in children as a result of reading literature aloud to them. In order to match appropriate literary experiences to a specific audience, the teacher must have a knowledge of the interests, needs, and strengths of the children, and use that knowledge to guide book selection and presentation. A research project involved tape recording the responses of first grade students in their story group sessions. In addition to the tape recording of verbal responses, a notebook with a checklist of nonverbal behaviors and space for additional comments was marked after each session. An analysis of the tapes revealed 40 categories that seemed to describe the range of responses that were exhibited. The categories were organized under these broad headings: responses to text, responses to story structure, and specifically directed communication. Additional categories were responses to illustration, nonword responses, the offering of personal knowledge and experience, creative language, stating pleasure or displeasure with the book, responses to title page information, comments about physical features of the book, and supplying "The End." The tally sheet framework further differentiated between those responses that related directly to the author's words in the text. Such a framework can provide some guidelines about what useful information may be gathered by observation in the read aloud setting. (HOD)

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CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
GRAND FORKS 58201

Volume 15, Number 1
September 1982

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Observing and Recording Children's Responses to Literature Read Aloud

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Anyone who works with young children has the opportunity to read many stories to them aloud. For most children and adults this story sharing is joyfully anticipated. So powerful is a good story that a teacher can calm an active class by offering to read one aloud. Children express their delight by asking for favorite stories again and again. However, the value of sharing literature with children is not limited to providing a warm and enjoyable break in the busy school day. In fact, the potential for academic, imaginative and affective growth stimulated by appropriate literary experiences is so great that the essential place of reading aloud in a literacy program for young children cannot be overemphasized.

The strength of literature is that it is an art which reveals to children the beauty and joy of written imagery. Children, in the role of spectator, are allowed to view their own past, to identify vicariously with the lives of others in a range of lands and settings, to realize impossible fantasies, to project themselves into a variety of futures and thereby extend their restricted range of experience. Hearing stories contributes to a process of ordering and organizing individual experience, both in a private and culturally significant way. Stories transmit social codes and through them children receive clues for surviving and comprehending the sociological and psychological complexities of their world.

The value of reading literature aloud to young children is also evident in a range of effects on vocabulary development and growth in reading skill. Reading aloud to children is linked to improving and extending listening comprehension of language patterns. Reading aloud provides the key to acquiring the insights that print is meaningful, and that speech is different than written language. Strengthening the connection between speech and writing is a basic prerequisite to learning to read independently.

Book language often does not match the patterns of speech familiar to the child, and therefore challenges comprehension. Hearing stories read aloud with expression by a competent adult brings audible clues to meaning and allows a child's listening comprehension to exceed that of reading comprehension and speaking ability. This extends and expands command of language and prepares the child for encountering reading material with greater confidence and understanding.

The research provides repeated evidence of measurable growth in reading performance and language development in children as a result of reading literature aloud to them. The effects are especially dramatic for economically disadvantaged children, students within the lowest ranges of academic achievement and those in the earlier grades. Studies also indicate that books read aloud have greater appeal, and that

children's own selection of reading material is strongly influenced by what has been read to them previously. Consistent read aloud experiences, especially more than once a day over an extended period, seem to create the most dramatic and measurable effects.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to create the circumstances for effective literary experiences which fully tap the potential value of reading aloud. Books selected for reading must be appropriate to the audience, and the read aloud setting should encourage eager participation from the children. The story should be skillfully delivered, and should reflect through pause and expression, the reader's awareness of the response of the listeners.

In order to match appropriate literary experiences to a specific audience, the teacher must have knowledge of the interests, needs and strengths of the children, and use that knowledge to guide book selection and presentation. Good teaching always requires sensitive observation of children's behavior, and for young children on-the-spot observations may well be the most effective method of gathering useful data about the cognitive, affective, social and aesthetic realities of the child.

In most cases, a young child's experiences with literature depend upon an adult who delivers the text orally to the child. While the adult reads, it is natural and quite common for a child to offer a great deal of verbal and non-verbal response to what he or she is receiving. This creates a setting in which a teacher can directly view observable responses children are making to stories. Thoughtful, skillful consideration of these observations in the read aloud setting can be the teacher's guide to making the reading of literature aloud the center of the language arts program.

With this goal in mind, I conducted a study in my first grade classroom to develop a method for observing children's verbal and non-verbal responses to literature. I wanted to gather information to help me understand the range of behaviors available for observation in the read aloud setting, and felt the best approach was to study the responses in the setting where they occur naturally.

I selected fifteen picture books that seemed likely to appeal to the children based on what I knew about them already, and also chose those books I felt I could read well. A certain balance and variety of story structures, language patterns, graphic styles and content was also represented by the group of books read. Included in the selection were three books by one author, two books about death, several folk tales, a fantasy, stories about a variety of family settings and three books with a well developed structural line.

The books were read and re-read to the children in small groups over a four month period (a total of three readings for each book). A consistent time in the school day and location in the classroom were arranged for the story sessions. While one group was listening to a story, the remainder of the class worked independently on a variety of activities. A small tape recorder placed in the midst of the group was used to record verbal responses, and a notebook with checklist of non-verbal behaviors and space for additional comments was marked for each session.

To maintain some consistency during the story sessions, I set some guidelines for my role as reader. I decided not to alter or elaborate upon the author's words during the readings in order to reduce the influence of any response of mine on that of the children. I also feel that the author's work should be respected as written and should be delivered to the children accurately. Of course this decision also meant that direct questions from children about vocabulary or story details were not answered by me during the reading of the story.

In addition, a priority was set of trying to maintain continuity of the story line while reading. Children laughed, commented and questioned at will as they listened. However, excessively long pauses for responding (which seemed to decrease concentration or involvement with the book for the group as a whole) were not encouraged. Part of my responsibility was to decide when a pause seemed useful or detrimental to the group's story experience. Constant decisions were made about where to pause; how long to hold an illustration for inspection; when to limit or encourage response with body gesture, facial expression or intonation; and when to begin reading again on top of a child's response. Learning to make these decisions effectively was one of the most useful outcomes for me of the study.

Early in the study, I began to notice recurring types of response and a list of categories of response was begun. After evaluating the transcripts of the tapes, I developed a detailed list of 41 categories that seemed to describe the range of responses that were exhibited by my class for the stories read. The categories were put into tally sheet form to facilitate analysis of the content of each response recorded on the transcripts. All responses to the nine readings of a given book were analyzed on one tally sheet with columns representing first, second and third readings.

The tally sheet organizes categories under these broad headings: 1) responses to text, 2) responses to story structure and 3) specifically directed communication. Additional categories are 4) responses to illustration, 5) non-word responses, 6) the offering of personal knowledge and experience, 7) creative language, 8) stating pleasure or displeasure with the book, 9) responses to title page information, 10) comments about physical features of the book and 11) supplying "The End."

The tally sheet framework differentiates between those responses which relate directly to the author's words in the text in the following ways: 1) joining or chiming in with the reader using the exact text as it is being read; 2) knowingly reciting the text before the reader delivers it; 3) predicting or anticipating in the child's own words what the text will say; 4) repeating words, phrases or whole sentences immediately after hearing them (whether verbatim, rephrased or in a mixture of the child's own words and the text); 5) direct reading from the pages of the book with or without the reader; 6) comments on or questions about specific vocabulary used by the author and 7) offering definitions and explanations of vocabulary.

Story structure is viewed on the tally sheet in terms of 1) plot or story action, 2) the characters, 3) the setting of the story and

4) the book's theme. Responses were tallied as either comments, questions or an indication of somehow identifying with that component of the story structure. There is an additional category in the area of plot for predictions of story action, either as a guess, or when a child is already familiar with the story, by telling what will happen next. There is also a separate category for making suggestions to characters (often phrased as "She should ____." or "He ought to ____.")

Responses to illustration are often difficult to identify from a written transcript alone, as they may have been clarified by pointing to a detail in the illustration. The notes kept on non-verbal behavior helped remedy this problem. Responses to content or technique in the illustrations are listed as either comments or questions.

Responses sometimes are specifically directed toward other children or to the reader. These responses are tallied as directly related to the story or as having no direct relation to the story. Although I avoided speaking words other than the text during the readings, instances of such communication are also tallied on the sheet.

The following non-word responses are listed on the tally sheet: 1) laughter, 2) exclamations (such as sighs, groans and gasps) and 3) "other" responses such as whistles, motor noises, yawns, clucks and other assorted sound effects that may be given.

The category of personal knowledge and experience is divided into two sections on the tally sheet for those responses directly related and those with no direct relation to the story. This includes stories or incidents from the children's own lives, as well as any other information not given in the text.

Children may creatively extend or build upon the book's language or story structure. On the tally sheet this category refers to the creation of rhyming words or phrases, dialogue for characters and new sentences based on the language patterns in the text. The remaining categories on the tally sheet include statements which specifically express pleasure or displeasure with the book; responding to the reading of the title page information, publication date or author's dedication; mention of the physical features of the book (size, age or condition of the book; type of paper; location of text; torn pages; or marks and stamps in the book) and finally supplying "The End" whether or not it actually appears in the text.

The categories are useful in studying the quantity, quality and pattern of children's responses over time to literature read aloud to them. The categories are by no means mutually exclusive, and any one response from a child may be described by several categories. Of course, every story is a separate creation and children's responses reflect the individuality of the books. However, the categories do provide a framework for identifying features of response which are typical, as well as those which are uncommon or unique. Although the conclusions I was able to draw from this study cannot be generalized to any population other than my classroom, they do provide some guidelines to other teachers about what useful information may be gathered by observation in the read aloud setting.

The most dramatic effect of re-reading the books was in the area of response to text. During the first readings of the books, response to text occurred with only average frequency. However, during the third readings it became the most frequent type of response, and the average number of responses surpassed that of every other category for first, second and third readings. For some books, especially those with rhyme, a repeated refrain, highly predictable language or colorful descriptions, verbatim recitation of the text became the dominant feature of response.

Instead of recitation, A Hole is to Dig, a conceptual book about simple definitions, motivated children to create their own definitions during the first readings, and by the third readings this creative language response was four times as frequent. Children extended the use of the pattern for making definitions, and created their own:

"A head is to sleep."
"The sun is so you can be warm."
"The sun is to shine in your eyes."
"Dishes are to eat on."
"A face is to see with."

There was repeated questioning of and comment on the word "faded" as it described flowers on a grave in The Dead Bird.

"How come the geraniums fainted?"
"What does that mean?"
"Died."
"Faded."
"Faded away."
"See if they faded."
"It means they died."
"Ah, poor things. The geraniums faded."

Often, of course, response to text is integrated with thinking and questioning of story content. When in Whistle for Willie, a boy is described as trying to get away from his shadow, several children responded,

"No one can get away from his shadow."

while others replied,

"Only the sun."
"Unless it's dark."
"Maybe he can dig a hole and get away that way."

It is not the nature of all stories to elicit verbatim recitation or use of language patterns in the text, nor is this desirable. Children were not particularly motivated toward mastery of the text for the books about death, for example, and instead responded more to the content in other ways. In presenting literature to children, a teacher may be aided by an awareness of which books do and do not elicit fascination with text specifically, and thereby select a more balanced variety of books.

Although responses to text became the most frequent form of response by the third readings, responses to characters and story action were the most frequent during the first and second readings on the average. As the books were re-read, responses remained as frequent in these categories, but responses to text became even more numerous. These responses were most often comments, but about a quarter of them were questions, predictions, suggestions to the characters or statements of identification with the characters or story action. If the teacher can become attuned to hearing these responses, they can be the source of planning activities extended from the story reading.

Especially during the second readings of The Story About Ping, the children made such statements of identification as:

"If I was Ping I'd just stay there till (the boat) came."
"I'd jump into the water and (run away) again."
"He should have run."

This response from the children could motivate further discussion or even the writing of alternative plots for the story.

The Steamroller challenged the students' conception of fantasy and reality. In the story, a steamroller seemingly destroys everything in its path, then a steamshovel restores everything to normal. Children commented:

"Her teeth would break out wouldn't they?"
"No way could somebody live through that."
"You mean they're not dead? How come they're not dead?"
"Because it's a silly story."

Non-word responses (such as exclamations and assorted sound effects) were about as numerous as responses to plot and characters on the average, with some stories, such as Whistle for Willie, contributing more heavily to that average than many others. Activities involving creative dramatics, choral reading and sound poetry may be very effective in connection to the reading of books which naturally elicit this type of response from children.

Communication between children and to the reader were the next most frequently represented categories of response on the average. These responses were most often directly related to the story. However, if a story generates a great deal of communication unrelated to it, this is a strong clue to the teacher that the story may not be appropriate for the audience.

Response to illustration was about equal to communication responses in frequency, and can reveal a variety of information about children's cognitive and aesthetic development. "Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Bear" has only three illustrations which elicited much response:

"Oooh! That's beautiful."
"That's what I thought it looked like. I had it in my mind."
"Yumm! Let me have some (lettuce)."
"Look at the pink sky."
"That's a sunset!"

Offering of personal knowledge and experience was the next most frequently represented category of response. These responses can often be useful to the teacher in revealing individual strengths in children. Early in The Gunniwolf the importance of the little girl staying out of the jungle is emphasized. Children recognized the predictability of the folk tale structure by saying,

"She will (go into the jungle)!"
"Uh-huh."
"I know these kinds of stories."

These are clues to children's previous exposure to literature, as well as a springboard for study of story structure.

Creative language followed in average frequency during the second and third readings of the books. Some of these examples have been discussed previously in relation to text. A teacher needs to be familiar with the more common responses to text to readily identify the more

creative ones. Children's creative responses can guide the planning of writing activities which include the creation of chants, rhymes, dialogue and newly created stories based on the author's style.

The remaining categories on the tally sheet were consistently represented by a low frequency of response. While this may not be surprising for some of the categories (responses to title page and providing "The End" for example), it should raise questions for others. It may suggest that awareness of theme, for example, needs to be guided or nurtured more directly by the teacher. Children may then be more able to articulate underlying meaning, especially after repeated exposure to a book. Further, a teacher can examine children's reactions to selected themes; for example, the birth of a baby, coping with death or the meaning of friendship; by choosing books which may elicit such response.

The most significant change in my style of sharing literature with children as a result of this study is the strengthening of my belief in the power and importance of re-reading books. Not all books deserve to be read aloud even once: but for the many that are worthwhile, re-reading again and again should be a regular classroom practice. For many books, repeated readings provide a powerful stimulus for language development, comprehension of story structure, identification with characters, gaining insight into themes of literature and creative expression related to a story. For young children to sort out the relationships between characters, to appreciate connections between text and illustrations or to comprehend the multiple levels of meaning in some books, re-reading may be essential.

Purposeful study of children's response to literature can verify for the teacher the benefits of interaction with well selected books. Through literature children assimilate a vocabulary of not only words, but also a wide range of vicarious experiences with lands, people and events. Stories provide imaginative manipulation of familiar surroundings and the unknown, as well as information about social expectations, individual wishes and crises and the efforts of others to resolve conflicts. A child's world view is supported, challenged and extended by the content of stories, and reading skill is motivated and developed through hearing stories read aloud. Through deeper understanding of children interacting with literature, the teacher can make the joys of language and benefits of literary experience a vital part of the schooling of every young child.

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Introducing the Author

Lisa Brissey is an elementary school librarian in Albuquerque, New Mexico with five years of teaching experience in the primary grades. She earned her M.A. in Elementary Education from the University of New Mexico in 1981. Her interests include integration of the fine arts in basic education, modern dance and storytelling. The article is taken from her thesis study entitled "Observing and Recording Children's Response to Literature Read Aloud." Anyone interested in responding to the article is invited to send comments to 1004 Silver SW, #2, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87102.